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Karpov vs. Korchnoi: Not your average grudge match

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

After six consecutive drawn games, the 13th world chess championship between the Soviet Union's Anatoly Karpov and Soviet defector Viktor Korchnoi has taken on the character of a grudge match that far exceeds most expectations.

This is a clash between playing styles, personalities and political systems, with both sides engaging in psych-out battles on and off the chess board.

As of now, it is the wily Korchnoi who has had the advantage in this war of nerves taking place in the verdant Catskills-like Philippine resort town of Baguio City. He has openly set out to discredit the Soviet system of chess, against a perfect product of that system who is 23 years his junior.

The 47-year old Korchnoi has always played second fiddle behind such Soviet champions as Tigran Petrosian, Boris Spassky and Mikhail Tal. However, since his defection to Switzerland two years ago, he is playing the best chess of his career.

Korchnoi is a fighter who, even in drawn positions, makes his opponents pay the price of playing him. The first evidence of this occurred in the titanic fifth game, a record-setting 124-move draw that lasted 12 hours over three sittings. Korchnoi outplayed the champion through the first session, holding a clear winning advantage when the game was first adjourned.

Then, during the second session, he put Karpov's king in check with the wrong piece and blundered away his win. Chess observers felt this would be a severe psychological blow to Korchnoi, but the challenger countered by resuming to otter Karpov a draw, dragging the champion through to a stalemate, as if to say: 'I may have blown this, but my stamina has not been affected.'

Karpov has been impassive and he has not panicked, but his lackluster play — he has yet to show any initiative in any of the games — indicates the enormous pressure under which he is playing. There are many who feel the 24-year-old is not a legitimate champion, as he won the crown by default when Bobby Fischer declined to defend the title he won in 1972.

Ironically, the current contestants are playing under the rules demanded by Fischer and refused by the international chess federation (FIDE). Previously, the winner was the first player to accumulate 12.5 points — a win worth one point, a draw half a point — leading to a lot of 'book draws' and a lack of fighting play. Fischer demanded that 10 games be won to win the championship, with draws not counting. When FIDE overruled him, Fischer declined to defend his crown. Now, the first player to win six matches will be declared champ.

Korchnoi claims that Karpov "licks the boots" of the Soviet regime. He taunts him when he says that Fischer is the best player in the world and Korchnoi is Number Two (indeed, Korchnoi has always been tough on Fischer).

The war of nerves has thus been manifested in petty, absurdist psychological manoeuvres — haggling over national flags and anthems, suspected electronic rays hidden in the combatants' chairs, and, the latest and most absurd case, so-called 'signals' sent to Karpov by his aides via different-colored yogurt.

Korchnoi also sits on a $1,3000 custom-made chair which, with its hydraulic mechanism, enables the challenger to tower a foot or two over the diminutive champion. Meanwhile, Karpov has had trouble finding a comfortable chair.

There will doubtless be other ploys before the championship is over, but at the rate they are going, this could be three or four months from now.

The 'grudge' aspect of the championship is being aided and abetted by the players' entourages, which respectively reflect their personalities.

Karpov is surrounded by such Soviet heavies as delegation chief Colonel Viktor Baturinsky (a former KGB prosecutor during the Stalin era) and cosmonaut Vitaly Sevastyanov (nominal head of the Soviet chess federation).

Korchnoi counters with Petra Leeuwerik, a Dutch woman who left her husband to be with Korchnoi when he defected, and Josha Mures, a fellow Soviet defector who lives in Israel and serves to keep the challenger's anti-Soviet feelings on fire.

As for their seconds — chess players who analyze adjourned positions and prepare opening strategies — they too are studies in opposites.

Karpov relies on former world champ Tal, who with Fischer has been the most exciting player of the past 30 years, and represents the antithesis of the champion's cool conservative style, as well as grandmaster Yuri Balashov, one of Karpov's strongest contemporaries.

Meanwhile, Korchnoi depends on two young British players, Raymond Keene and Michael Stean. The British have never produced a championship calibre player, yet the two Cambridge players have emerged as the most engaging analysts and chess writers on the scene.

Soon, one of the players will break the ice and actually succeed in winning a game. But, with the intense willpower of all involved, the first victory will only serve to add to the 'grudge' of this titanic match.

(Gazette Music Critic Juan Rodriguez has played in class 'A' chess tournaments in Montreal)

VIKTOR KORCHNOI
He's taken advantage

This titanic chess struggle is a clash between playing styles, personalities and political systems. And not all the moves are made on the board

ANATOLY KARPOV
He's paying price

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